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101041Z Feb 06

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000829

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/10/2016

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SUBJECT: THAKSIN VERSUS SONDHI: MOBILIZING THE CROWDS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RALPH L. BOYCE FOR REASON 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary. Anti-Thaksin agitator Sondhi Limthongkul is trying to build on the success of his February 4 rally by expanding the movement to oust the Prime Minister. This new "Alliance for Democracy" will rally again this Saturday, February 11. Prime Minister Thaksin opened the week with a flip-flop on whether Sondhi would be allowed to use the Royal Plaza Park for his rally and the PM is trying to push back by mobilizing groups of supporter from the provinces. Bangkok's university students may be joining in the anti-Thaksin fight. The PM remains firmly in control and has apparently shorn up support in his ruling party, but the increased number of passionate players in this drama may test the peace. End Summary.

SONDHI: THIS ISN'T ABOUT ME, BUT GIVE ME THE MIC  
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12. (C) Following on his large and peaceful rally against Thaksin last Saturday (ref), media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul held a press conference on February 8 to announce that he was stepping aside as the sole leader of the anti-Thaksin movement. In an apparent bid to expand support for the anti-Thaksin movement and defuse troublesome questions about Sondhi's role as a political reformer (given his past friendship with the PM), the media magnate announced that a new alliance of groups dedicated to ousting the PM would lead future efforts, with Sondhi merely "one of many" leaders. (Note. The exact composition of this alliance remains unclear, though it appears to include several former Thaksin supporters, like Sondhi. End Note.) Sondhi's effort at fading into the background appeared only half-hearted, however; he has challenged Thaksin to a one-on-one debate over the "truth" in the PM's recent business dealings, and the program for this Saturday's rally remains centered on the latest version of Sondhi's television show.

THAKSIN WILL "FIGHT TILL I DIE"  
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13. (C) Thaksin remains bluntly defiant in the face of last Saturday's rally. On Monday the PM publicly snapped that Sondhi would not be allowed to rally in the Royal Park Plaza anymore. After several newspapers questioned whether the PM could really control public access to such an open, public area, the PM's office quickly revised this statement, explaining that Sondhi would be allowed to continue his program if he filed the correct permits. The Prime Minister quickly moved past this speedbump, telling an estimated 4,000 supporters at Government House on Thursday that he will "fight till I die." Indeed, this large crowd (which appears to have been bussed in from up-country) mirrored several, smaller gatherings of pro-PM crowds in rural Nong Khai and Nonthaburi. Local press has reported rumors of Interior Ministry efforts to recruit (and pay) supporters to come to the capital. One pro-PM group has reportedly organized in the PM's hometown to put a curse on Sondhi.

THE SIXTH MAN COMES OFF THE BENCH  
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14. (C) Previous Post reporting has highlighted the lack of significantly large, organized student participation in either the anti or pro-Thaksin crowds. Given the historical importance of student groups in the 1973 and 1992 political movements that forced political change, this has been a key absence. That may be changing. The vocal cries by some university faculty for Thaksin to step down (which have been going on for weeks now) may be trickling down to the student body. On February 10, Poloff visited Thammasat University, where approximately 1,000 students were rallying support for a petition calling for the PM's impeachment. According to the English-language newspaper The Nation, the head of Thammasat's Student Union cited Thaksin's recent sale of Shin Corp (ref B) as the basis for this protest. The Nation and other papers also report that students from several other Bangkok universities are beginning to organize against the PM as well.

BUT THE ANTI-PM PROFESSIONALS REMAIN NEUTERED

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15. (C) The main Opposition Democrat Party, for all intents and purposes, has been unable to capitalize on the excitement so far. DP leaders had hoped to use recent factional tensions within Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, in particular TRT MP Sanoh Tientong's Wang Nam Yen faction, to pass a censure motion against the PM. Meetings between Thaksin lieutenants and the dissidents appear to have unified TRT, however, and the DP effort is likely to fall short, once again.

COMMENT: EVIL WILL ALWAYS TRIUMPH, BECAUSE GOOD IS DUMB  
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16. (C) Sondhi's effort to broaden the anti-Thaksin base is smart and probably the only way to sustain the movement. Whether Sondhi can live with a diminished role is an open question. The PM remains firmly, almost defiantly in command. The emergence and possible prominence of pro-PM groups and anti-Thaksin students introduces uncertainty and an element of risk to the political equation. The crowds this weekend will probably be smaller than last weekend, when the numbers were inflated by the rent-a-crowds bused in from the provinces by Sondhi's supporters. And most observers believe this weekend's rally will be relatively orderly and peaceful. But both camps appear headed in the direction of escalating the conflict via a show of numbers in the street - always a risky proposition.  
BOYCE